

# From the Haitian revolution to the spectre of Tahrir: is a global revolution possible?

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Attack and take of the Crête-à-Pierrot (4 - march 24, 1802). Original illustration by Auguste Raffet, engraving by Hébert.

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2019 has been a year of increasing revolutionary fervour. Literally millions of people took to the streets in Algeria, Sudan, Chile, Lebanon, Iraq, Hong Kong, Ecuador, Haiti, Guinea, Bolivia, Spain, France, Brazil, Iran, Czech Republic, Columbia, India and counting... The mere scale and geographical reach of these protests evoke memories of a previous wave of global uprisings set off by the Tunisian revolution and the subsequent occupation of Tahrir Square in Egypt in 2011. When those uprisings also reached Mahmood Mamdani's home country, Uganda, he was the first to speak of a "[spectre of Tahrir](#)" haunting rulers across the world. His statement soon proved prophetic as the tide of protests spilled over from the African continent into the rest of the world. Spanish indignados took over the streets of Madrid and Barcelona, soon followed by other cities around the world. Later that year, media organization Adbusters asked its audience whether they were ready "[for a Tahrir moment?](#)", calling on American citizens to [occupy Wall Street](#).

After this year's mass resistance, it is clear that the spectre of Tahrir never disappeared. From the [Gezi Park protests](#) in Turkey, the millions of protesters in the streets of [Brazil](#), the [Hirak movement](#) in Morocco to [#NuitDebout](#) and the [Gilets Jaunes](#) in France, to name just a few – they all seemed harbingers leading up to a new culmination in 2019. The question is how to make sense of these uprisings? Are we witnessing a global revolution? Or merely dozens of coinciding national revolts, scattered around the globe, ignited by each other's indignation and perseverance?

In the stream of accounts grappling with the uprisings, two important elements are often overlooked. That is, first, the discrepancy between our globalized world and the nation-state as the dominant imagined political community. While explanations often get stuck in a perception of the nation-state as the sole container for political confrontation and popular demand, the crux of the problem is precisely that there are [no national solutions](#) for a [global systemic crisis](#) producing social inequality, climate change and migration. Despite the obvious observation that protesters around the world are denouncing the same kinds of problems at the same time, this form of "[methodological nationalism](#)" continues to see these different uprisings primarily as [the result of endogenous crises](#).

What if our imagination of the nation-state actually prevents us from seeing what is really going on here? As Susan Buck-Morss argues in her new book, [Revolution Today](#): "[t]he nation state as an epistemological form captured certain realities but obscured others." Therefore, "[i]t could not recognize the existence of non-state

political imaginaries already in existence” (p6).

This brings us to the second element, namely, the transformative capacities, open-endedness and unpredictability of an ongoing process of revolt that radically challenges precisely the political and ontological assumptions of our dominant political imaginations. History has shown that revolutionary struggles rarely start off with a clear set of ideas for a different future. These are produced along the way, within the revolutionary process itself. Radical change happens, writes Buck-Morss, “but it cannot be predicted from present consciousness, because consciousness itself alters in time—sometimes more suddenly than anyone had thought possible” (p11).

A global revolution is not a reality yet, but it might be in the making

This has important implications for our understanding of the present moment. Clearly, a global revolution is not a reality yet, but it might be in the making. Today, we seem to be at the crossroads, but a global fix, a new global future, still seems unthinkable. People have come to understand that [their destinies are linked but their anger and activism is still framed in reformist claims](#). The new is built on the wreckage of the old, but we have no idea yet how the new might materialize.

How can one begin to imagine such a global revolutionary process? One that might echo the idealism of the old socialist international or the pan-African movement of the 20th century, but will need to be built on radically new recipes and ideas of [social and environmental justice](#), [democracy](#) and [decolonization](#)? While Marxism and socialism served as a common language for many revolutionary movements in the 20th century, the socialist alternatives that exists today still rely on increasing [environmental extraction and destruction](#) and limitless [growth-based production, consumption and redistribution](#). To understand where we are today, it might be interesting, perhaps, to go back in time and remind ourselves of an upheaval with global repercussions, yet unthinkable at the very moment it unfolded: the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804).

## The unthinkable Haitian Revolution

The first and only successful slave revolt in modern history, the Haitian Revolution erupted in August 1791. The French, the British, and then the French again were defeated in a guerrilla war under the command of charismatic leaders such as Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. By 1804, after more than a decade of struggle, the richest colony in the western hemisphere, Saint-Domingue, became the first black sovereign modern state, Haiti. Toussaint Louverture, in the meantime, had died in a French prison. However, Louverture’s capture in 1802, at that time the revolution’s most important leader, failed to stop the revolutionary movement. It had radicalized to such a point that any return to the old status quo had become impossible.

As Louverture himself famously [stated](#) as he boarded a French ship into exile: “In overthrowing me, you have cut down in Saint-Domingue only the trunk of the tree of the liberty of the blacks; it will grow back from the roots, because they are deep and numerous” (p278).

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The revolution had shocked Europe and its political and commercial elite. The great accomplishment of the Haitian Revolution was not only the fact that the Haitians succeeded in driving out the two most powerful European Empires, but also that they violently exposed as myths the new European ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Historians of the Haitian revolution argue that it was by far the most radical and progressive political event of the so-called [\*Age of Revolutions\*](#).

Haitian revolutionaries redefined the meanings of freedom, equality and humanity, and went far beyond what their enlightened European contemporaries thought possible or even desirable. According to [\*Carolyn Fick\*](#), only the Haitian revolution “pushed the universalism of natural rights to its ultimate fulfillment in actualizing human freedom by overthrowing slavery”. In this, she adds, the revolutionaries radicalized notions of liberty, equality and rights “in ways that no other historical event of that period could have done.”

Unlike the American or French revolution, the Haitian Revolution led to a new constitution in 1805 that explicitly prohibited slavery, as well as discrimination based on skin colour. It broke with the then prevailing racist worldview and considered [\*all Haitians, regardless of their skin colour, as black\*](#). This included a large group of German and Polish mercenaries who deserted from the French army and eventually fought with the Haitians against Napoleon's forces. [\*Blackness\*](#) was turned into an issue “of allegiance to the project of freedom and independence” and stopped being an issue of colour (p43). These radical ideals of the Haitian revolution represented the aspiration for a new humanism in a post-racial world that lived on in the works of later revolutionary thinkers such as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon.

The Haitian revolution's unparalleled radicalism was at the same time *an unthinkable event*, as Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, even as it took place before the eyes of the world. At that time, Europe's prevailing racism within its own Enlightenment traditions and the complicity of its intellectual bourgeoisie in the colonial endeavours, blinded them to the radical changes unfolding on the Caribbean island. Even the most progressive political actors in Europe still thought of enslaved persons as subjects to be saved by their ‘enlightened brother’ ([\*usually a man\*](#)), not as people who could liberate themselves or invent their own freedom.

It is worth citing Trouillot's book [\*Silencing the Past\*](#) at length. Anticipating accusations of moral presentism, he states:

“let me emphasize that I am not suggesting that eighteenth-century men and women should have thought about the fundamental equality of humankind in the same way some of us do today. On the contrary, I am arguing that they could not have done so. But I am also drawing a lesson from the understanding of this historical impossibility. The Haitian Revolution did challenge the ontological and political assumptions of the most radical writers of the Enlightenment. *The events that shook up Saint-Domingue from 1791 to 1804 constituted a sequence for which not even the extreme political left in France or in England had a conceptual frame of reference.* They were “unthinkable” facts in the framework of Western thought” (p82).

## **An unthinkable revolution today?**

Despite the fact that many planters, colonialists and political commentators at the time were eager to represent enslaved workers as content with the conditions under

which they lived, this didn't mean that they were somehow blind to the long history of revolt against slavery or even denied its occurrence before the explosion of the Haitian Revolution. To the contrary, when it occurred, it was viciously repressed. However, as Trouillot explains, they could not imagine that such resistance existed as a *global* phenomenon. Each case of defiance, instead, "was treated separately and drained of its political content", something Trouillot describes as "methodological individualism" (p83-84). Enslaved workers revolted or ran away because they were mistreated or maladjusted, but never, in the perception of the planters, because of the *system* of slavery itself.

Importantly, Trouillot also states that the revolution was not only unthinkable among western enlightened intellectuals, it was also unspoken among the enslaved themselves. The reason was that the "claims of the revolution were indeed too radical to be formulated in advance of its deeds" (p.88). What started in 1791 as a mass insurrection denouncing the brutal regime of plantation labour, evolved and radicalized throughout years of war. Rebel leaders' initial demands were reformist. They demanded three days a week to work in their own gardens.

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Nevertheless, the course of the struggle soon led, successively, to the crumbling of French colonial control, the proclamation of general liberty, the taking over of state power in Saint-Domingue by Toussaint Louverture (yet still loyal to the French colonial order and the motherland), and eventually to the proclamation of an independent Haiti – an event that challenged the "ontological order of the West and the global order of colonialism" (p89). The realization of a black sovereign state with the most radical modern constitution at that time could only materialize as it was taking place, within and during the revolutionary *process* itself.

Can we draw a parallel with the protests today? Can we imagine that something is in the making that we cannot yet envision? If we consider the worldwide protests of 2019 as part of a longer history in which the occupation of Tahrir Square in 2011 and the spreading of its 'spectre' around the world constituted a first moment of culmination and global resonance, then we can begin to discern the contours of a world-wide interconnected process of *ongoing* political radicalization and praxis.

Of course, the intensity and frequency of any particular protest can only be maintained for so long, but if protesters in different countries today claim that they have reached "[a point of no return](#)", this means that [the revolutionary momentum of 2011 never died out](#). It means, to quote [Rosa Luxemburg's](#) analysis of the Russian revolution of 1905, that the "most precious, because lasting, thing in the rapid ebb and flow of the wave is its mental sediment". And, in 1905, still very few already imagined 1917.

## **From national crisis to the imagination of global solidarity**

While many analysts recognize that the protests in Chile were not just about metro fares, that those in Lebanon were not just about a WhatsApp tax, that the revolts in Sudan, Haiti, France, Iran and other countries were about more than just rising fuel prices, they still represent these uprisings, time and again, as the result of national mismanagement, as a problem of national corruption and as an expression of

national economic crises.

“Crony capitalism” is often the vogue word to explain what is happening in countries like [Lebanon](#), [Chile](#), [Sudan](#), [Haiti](#) or [Algeria](#). The concept implicitly suggests that capitalism in authoritarian political systems, or countries in the Global South more generally, is somehow disconnected from capitalism in the so-called democratic world (i.e. countries in the Global North). Capitalism obviously evokes imaginations of the global, yet crony capitalism always seems to refer to a particular local and, above all, deviant imitation.

As a consequence, the suggestion is put forward that the solution lies in separating business from politics, as Lebanese economist Sami Nader indicated on [PBS News Hour](#). Or it opens the door for US State Department Officials to express their support for the protests and blame local government’s inability to prioritize “[true economic reform](#)”, as in the case of Lebanon. The latter usually means inviting the IMF and the World Bank to come and “repair” the broken country. Yet, there is plenty of [research](#) showing that [structural adjustment](#) is rather a [cause](#) for protest instead of a solution, not only in the Global South but also in [the Global North](#).

The protesters in the streets are quickly outpacing political analysts in new and radical ways

The point here is not to deny, of course, the crony character of national politicians. Nor is it my intention to ignore the importance and specificity of local situations. Rather, I argue that those explanations often remain trapped in methodological nationalism and therefore neglect, first of all, the deeply relational geography of global capitalism, and secondly, a more radical process of political change currently in the making.

Meanwhile, the protesters in the streets are quickly outpacing political analysts in new and radical ways. More and more people around the globe are becoming [increasingly aware](#) of the global scale of the crisis and the imperative for [global solidarity](#). The immense [global resonance](#) of the protests guarantee that the legacies of these revolts cannot simply be undone or reversed.

Activists around the world are watching each other, learning from each other and [expressing solidarity](#) with each other. In an interview for *Historical Materialism*, [three Sudanese activists](#) explained how revolutions are learning processes and push people to think global. As one of them, Sara Abbas, stated:

“The first wave of Arab uprisings taught us some cautionary lessons (...), for example about how fast and deep the counter-revolutionary attacks come, and that we should not dismantle our street movements too soon because they are all we’ve got. Looking to the future now, on a very strategic level, we need to support each other (not just in the Arab world but in the Middle East and Africa more broadly) because every victory makes the ground beneath our own revolutionary currents more firm. And every dictator and repressive regime that remains standing works to undermine our movements across the region. Most importantly, we need to move from nationalism to internationalism. This is a tall order for this region, I know. But we must.”

## **Towards a new (and global) political praxis?**

In this revolutionary process, ‘[the streets are the classroom](#)’. There gets decided who



may speak and what new truth is produced, while traditional centres of power and knowledge production are being defied and/or removed. Old truths of sectarian divide are being contested and challenged by new ones of (inter)national unity and solidarity in countries like [Lebanon](#) and [Iraq](#). Iranian protesters are **emboldened** by the popular protests of the Lebanese and the Iraqis who were in their turn encouraged by the examples of the Algerians and the Sudanese.

Protesters rising up in Bogota, capital of Columbia, are waving [Chilean and Ecuadorian flags](#). In the wake of the Chilean uprising, a protest song denouncing rape culture and sexual violence went viral and became [an international feminist phenomenon](#). The spectre of Tahrir moved from Cairo to [Tahrir Square in Baghdad](#) where protesters display an exceptional level of solidarity, unity and self-organization in very difficult and violent circumstances. After years of pessimism, talks about Arab winters and counter-revolutionary violence, Tahrir once again forms a centre stage.

Also in the so-called established liberal democracies, the spectre of Tahrir set in motion a radical process redefining the very meaning of politics – and by no means do I want to suggest that this would be the first time in history. A new meaning that, as it were, freed democracy from its representative and parliamentary straitjacket (again).

Despite their substantial differences in tactics, modes of expression and demands, movements such as the Gilets Jaunes, Extinction Rebellion and before them the indignados literally moved politics back where it belongs: on the streets, in the square, in public space. According to Yves Sintomer, a political scientist at Paris 8 University, the Gilets Jaunes have reinvigorated democratic politics in France: "There's a danger in France of reducing democracy to a small political game, where only those who want to be elected are playing, and the people are watching", he told [BBC correspondent Lucy Williamson](#). "The gilets jaunes have again put this huge majority of people at the front of the stage."

Long before the 2011 uprisings, many people living in the margins of society, indigenous peoples, peasant peoples, etc., were already leading the fight for social and environmental justice

To be clear, I do not want to suggest that the contemporary street-politics are inventing a new society from scratch. There is "[a wealth of language and ideas out there](#)" produced by a variety and often very diverse group of actors, ranging from indigenous communities, the decolonization movement, the degrowth movement, peasant organizations and anti-racist, feminist and workers' movements all over the world that offer us viable alternatives for the contemporary disaster of a racialized, class-based and patriarchal global capitalist system. Long before the 2011 uprisings, many people living in the margins of society, indigenous peoples, peasant peoples, etc., were already leading the fight for social and environmental justice, and they [continue](#) to do so.

However, the position of marginality from which the latter departed, was not just material or geographical. It was also about being ideologically marginal to dominant ways of thinking that turn all peoples and nature into resources of economic growth, part of the neoliberal project [to privatize everything](#).

Within the stream of events emerging from the spectre of Tahrir, previously marginalized ideas are given the space to develop, spread and challenge this

neoliberal hegemony. Just like in 2011, the contemporary wave of protests are contributing to the diffusion and [mainstreaming](#) of radical ideas at an unseen pace. This is how we might begin to imagine a global revolution. These protests all contribute to a new global consciousness: the neoliberal consensus (if there ever was one) is dead and a mere return to the old status quo has become impossible.

## Counter revolution, violence and democracy

This being said, we should not be blind, of course, for what hasn't been achieved yet, or for the pitfalls and limits of global movements in the making ([Extinction Rebellion](#) is one example). Moreover, we should not be blind either for powerful counter-revolutionary forces that [are trying to derail](#) this evolving global revolution through scare-mongering tactics of [racism, misogyny, homophobia and religious fundamentalism](#), or even outright [war](#). In the past, nationalist, exclusionist and racist rhetoric has actively destroyed the potential for and actual achievements of global solidarity between social movements across the world.

As the protests were growing in number and inspiring people in other countries, (authoritarian) leaders around the world are becoming increasingly [nervous](#), warning their own people about [the dangers](#) of protesting and the risks of political instability. President Jair Bolsonaro, for example, [warned](#) the Brazilian people not to try what others were doing in protests sweeping Latin America. And the Egyptian government was very quick to voice its support for the regime of the now ousted ex-president of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir. During a visit to Sudan last year, immediately after the protests broke out, Cairo's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said that the "[stability of Sudan means \(the\) stability of Egypt](#)." Consequently, authoritarian leaders around the world are also [learning and sharing ideas and strategies](#) to counter the protests they face, often with the help of reactionary governments in countries like the United States, Russia, Iran and Israel.

Finally, we cannot be blind to the violence. We should never forget that thousands of people are being killed or severely wounded all over the world because they speak up and reclaim public space, especially in authoritarian contexts but also in liberal democratic societies. Precisely because of this violence we should absolutely resist those who discard these protests and [the violent confrontations](#) that coincide with them as an evolution that upsets the democratic order or restrains a democratic transition, or even, more disturbingly, as events that reveal "[the thin veneer of civilization](#)".

Tragically, as I [wrote](#) a couple of years ago, history shows that non-violent political action often only becomes effective when it provokes violence, when it obliges the powerful to expose the violence that underlies the protection of the status quo. Indeed, one might say that the very point of non-violent political action is to make this violence explicit, to make it part of the democratic struggle by bringing people face to face with what they are really up against. We should not forget, as [Barrington Moore](#) reminded us, that "Western democracy has behind it a very violent history."

Today, the protesters of Chile, Iraq, Sudan, Haiti, Iran, France and many other places around the world are exposing the violent structures that order their societies precisely by refusing to leave without a struggle.

## A radically open and revolutionary moment

Yet, despite all this, 2019 might actually be the proof that what we witness today is somehow irreversible. As one [Greek activist](#) put it, reflecting on the occupation of Syntagma Square in Greece and its subsequent clearance by police forces in 2011: “Imagine a tree (...). It was cut down right when it started to blossom, but as it fell down, the cool summer breeze took its leaves and seeds and planted them in all the squares and villages of Greece. Syntagma never died – it spread”.

Echoing the famous statement of Toussaint Louverture before he went into exile, this “story of the tree is not just the story of Syntagma”, Leonidas Oikonomakis and Jérôme Roos stress, “it is the story of a global struggle for real democracy”. This doesn’t mean that we are automatically heading for a bright future, only that the contemporary situation is radically open-ended. Can we build on what the Haitian revolutionaries started two centuries ago: the struggle for a radical new humanism? Can we think the global revolution?